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Congress pushes for answers and control on covert action

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WASHINGTON — A showdown looms this week between the President and Congress over policy in Central America, as increasingly frustrated legislators move toward cutting off American aid to Nicaraguan rebels.

The House and Senate Intelligence Committees will convene in special closed sessions beginning today to question high-level intelligence officials about U.S.-funded covert actions against Nicaragua.

They also will consider legislation that could shut down the operation and further restrict the administration's freedom to initiate covert activities elsewhere.

Sen. Gary Hart (D., Colo.) said he would introduce a resolution today calling upon President Reagan to cut off financial support of counter-revolutionary forces in Nicaragua.

At the same time, Sen. Christopher Dodd (D., Conn.) and Rep. Tom Harkin (D., Iowa), two critics of the administration's policies in Central America, said they will seek rare secret sessions of the full House and Senate to brief all legislators about U.S. covert activities in the region.

Rep. Michael Barnes (D., Md.), chairman of the House Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee, has introduced the first comprehensive bill in Congress to end CIA activities directed at Nicaragua.

Barnes' bill has been referred to the House Intelligence Committee where aides to Chairman Edward Boland (D., Mass.) are considering its adoption as a committee bill.

The Barnes amendment would supersede the so-called Boland amendment of late 1982, which constituted the first attempt to restrict CIA activities in Central America. It prohibited the use of U.S. funds to "overthrow" Nicaragua's Sandinista government but did not rule out aid to the counter-revolutionaries.

Barnes' legislation will be taken up by his subcommittee today in open session.

Critics charge that the Boland amendment provided the administration with a semantic alibi. It could claim that its intent in helping



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the anti-Sandinista forces was never to overthrow the Sandinistas but simply to interdict Sandinista arms shipments to El Salvador — the primary goal of the operation presented to and authorized by the congressional intelligence committees.

The Barnes legislation would close the loopholes of the Boland amendment and have the practical effect of banning all U.S. aid to the counterrevolutionaries.

Said one critical administration official: "Without acknowledging that we are involved in something right now, the Barnes provision would be so sweeping that again the United States would seem powerless, adrift and weak in the eyes of Cuba, and the Sandinistas and the guerrillas in El Salvador would be laughing at us.... We would lose face and eventually we might lose Nicaragua and the rest of Central America to the Communists."

The official said the Barnes bill also could severely restrict what he termed legitimate military aid to the Honduran armed forces; reduce the number of advisers in Honduras; and preclude the establishment of U.S. military installations on Honduran soil — an option the Pentagon has been considering as a counterweight to Soviet and Cuban military construction in Nicaragua.

The House Intelligence Committee will also consider legislation proposed by Rep. Wyche Fowler (D., Ga.), chairman of the panel's oversight and evaluation subcommittee. It would give Congress the power to stop a covert operation should it appear to be getting out of control or should its guidelines be violated.

Fowler complained last week that although the CIA had technically complied with requirements of the law, the administration apparently had withheld from the intelligence committees several documents related to Central America.

Fowler and other liberal committee members want top-level officials — including CIA Director William Casey and John Negroponte, U.S. ambassador to Honduras — to appear before the committee under oath at the hearings beginning Wednesday.

Rep. Lee Hamilton (D., Ind.), another House Intelligence Committee member, Monday released a staff document containing 12 options expected to be discussed at the committee's Wednesday session. All the options offered would seek to persuade President Reagan to call off or severely curb U.S. support for the covert operations against Nicaragua.

The most severe options proposed include complete disclosure by the committee of the covert operation in conjunction with a resolution disapproving of it; elimination or severe limitation of congressional funding for the operation; elimination of the CIA's contingency fund to preclude unauthorized continuation of the covert activities; and a vote to restrict by law the types of covert operations that may be authorized in the future.

The Senate Intelligence Committee, in a special closed hearing today, will review a report on CIA activities in Central America submitted by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), a committee member.

The classified study is said to detail the Nicaragua operation from its inception to the present and includes "evidence" of how the CIA may have circumvented the Boland amendment.

Confronted with increasing congressional concern about the covert operations in Central America, administration officials insist that the CIA has honored the Boland amendment and that the original intent of the covert operation remains unchanged: interdiction of Salvador-bound Sandinista arms.